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# U.S. aides split on combat role in Latin nations

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WASHINGTON — As the military forces in Central America grow larger, more lethal and more sophisticated, sharp divisions are reported between civilian officials in the Reagan administration who want expanded U.S. involvement and top military officers who urge moderation.

The Reagan administration appears eager to intervene decisively in the region. But it has tried to do so, thus far at least, without a U.S. soldier stepping directly into combat or dying in public.

The situation pits officials such as Fred Ikle, undersecretary of defense for policy, against members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The civilians and Army Gen. Paul F. Gorman, the can-do, ardent anti-communist commander of the U.S. Southern Command, based in Panama, appear to have much of the uniformed military establishment in retreat, according to several officials who did not want to be identified but who are involved in the debate. This means that the way has been opened for stepped-up planning and possible U.S. military operations.

The debate has intensified as both sides in the Salvadoran civil war have become stronger. During the last four years, the size of the rebel forces in El Salvador has risen to 17,000, from 3,500 to 4,500, and the Salvadoran Army has grown to 39,000 troops, from 9,000 to 11,000. Ragtag guerrilla platoons have grown and merged to become potent, well-armed brigades of 500 or more.

Hard-liners like Ikle and Gorman support such operations as attacks by unmarked U.S. Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunships against guerrilla strongholds, indirect air support to Nicaraguan rebels, U.S. Navy gunfire and clandestine activities by secret U.S. military commando-style units trained for assassinations, sabotage, mining, intelligence-gathering and counterinsurgency.

"For now, I think the idea is, go clandestine and confess when caught," ventured a retired Army general long involved with U.S. military planning in Central America.

Some small, elite U.S. Army Special Forces units already are training local soldiers in El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras in some of those skills.

According to Pentagon, congressional and independent sources, clandestine incursions into Nicaragua also may have occurred. "But woe be to us if we get caught," said one Pentagon planner who said he had knowledge of such operations. Southern Command spokesmen have consistently denied these reports, but they refused all comment on CIA Agency operations to which Special Forces units are sometimes attached.

Those same sources cite the following as missions that Special Forces units have taken on:

- A U.S. Navy SEAL (Sea-Air-Land) unit of about a dozen Spanish-speaking frogmen trained Salvadoran naval divers at the port of La Union, close to what the United States contends are the sea lanes used by Nicaragua to resupply Salvadoran rebels.

- At least 160 U.S. Army Special Forces personnel run the U.S.-created Regional Military Training Center at Puerto Castilla in northern Honduras.

- Since April, U.S. Special Forces units in northern Costa Rica have trained rural guards in the use of mortars and have set up a series of radio antennas and relay points.

- Demolition and propaganda experts from the Seventh Special Forces Group, stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., are training elements of the most aggressive and professional Salvadoran army unit, the Third Brigade, based in San Miguel. In the fall, 70 Green Berets from Fort Bragg trained four Honduran infantry battalions in counterinsurgency exercises conducted near Choluteca.

Since Gen. Gorman's arrival, the United States has upgraded seven Honduran airfields and landing strips, the majority within minutes by air from the Nicaraguan border. At least one of the airfields, at Aguacate in south-central Honduras, was later used by the CIA, according to a classified General Accounting Office report obtained by Knight-Ridder Newspapers. A large number of smaller landing zones have been cleared in Honduras to accommodate helicopters.

The presence of the Special Forces missions in Central America concerns some planners. "Small forces can get you into serious political problems," says Robert H. Kupperman of the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, a key proponent of so-called low-intensity forces that are intended to fight guerrillas and terrorists, not tanks and artillery.

"Suppose you get your fingers singed — say you knock off the wrong guy and get caught — what do you do?" asks Kupperman. "Immediately, it's a White House-level politi-

cal problem. The rule is, the bigger the forces, the more you have to back them up with political cunning, but I don't think we know what we're doing politically."

Gorman worries some U.S. experts on Central America. One Army general described him as "absolutely brilliant, but a man with czarist tendencies, in need of an occasional humility lesson." Gorman is hard-line even by Pentagon standards. He rarely wastes an opportunity, even in social conversation, to term Nicaragua "a Marxist garrison state."

Said an Army colleague: "Expect him to be convinced he's right. Expect him to have tremendous energy. Expect him to get preoccupied with a military solution to the situation."

Gorman's assignment, in May 1983, elevated the Southern Command billet from a three-star to a four-star position, a move signaling the region's increased importance to the Pentagon and the administration.

At Gorman's behest, according to sources in the intelligence community, U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency officials in Honduras are developing a detailed analysis of options for Salvadoran guerrilla attacks. Such an analysis, the sources say, would be necessary to carry out effective bombing attacks against the guerrillas.

In neutral Costa Rica, which has no standing army, Gorman has promoted militarization against Sandinista invaders and has encouraged Costa Rica to develop a regional military-boot factory. Other Central American countries would make uniforms, belts and gear.

According to military officers, Gorman also is attempting to gain control of CIA activities in the region, particularly those of the more than 14,000 CIA-backed contras in remote areas of Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

"The inter-relationship of the CIA and the Pentagon exists back in Washington," said Gen. E.C. "Shy" Meyer, who retired last year as Army chief of staff. "But it's part of the stress down there, particularly now that the agency's activity has been made overt. We have to be integrated, and with a clear understanding of our objectives."

Meyer described Gorman, who has served both as the Pentagon's top representative to the CIA and as the top adviser to Gen. John W. Vessey, chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, as "well-positioned to get things done."

Many military commanders and administration figures reject the use of U.S. ground troops because of the size of the force that would be needed. Most estimates place the number of troops needed for an invasion of Nicaragua at 70,000 to 100,000. One published projection, by Theodore H.